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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000134

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SUBJECT: "PUBLIC COMMITTEES" CONCEPT FOR SECURITY IN NAJAF MAY ALSO
SPUR MILITIA ONE-UPSMANSHIP

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CLASSIFIED BY: Charles Hunter, Regional Coordinator, REO Al
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REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: In an effort to combat a recent rise in violence in the province, the Najaf Provincial Council has approved the formation of Public Committees intended to work as "community watch" organizations. While the province's dominant political entities generally agree that this step is necessary, others such as the Iraqi National Accord (INA) think Public Committees are an attempt to circumvent efforts to dismantle Shi'a militias. No announcement has been made regarding a final version of the Public Committees, but the skeptics' concerns appear well founded. The price of this form of "security" would be more armed men on Najaf's streets beyond the GoI's control, and conceivably a Sadrist copycat organization as well. End summary and comment.

¶2. (C) Najaf Deputy Governor Abdul Hussein Abtan discussed means of improving his province's security situation in a meeting with REO staff on August 31. (Note: Abtan is a high-ranking local member of SCIRI, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which dominates the Najaf Provincial Council. End note.) Abtan contended that after recent attacks in Najaf and Kufa it became important to devise a plan that would provide security for the people of Najaf, stating, "The insurgency has made instability in Najaf its number one goal." While actions in Najaf were the final step in the drive for Public Committees, the impetus for the initial discussions came from the bombing of the shrine in Samarra in February 2006 and the feeling that there is an increasing crisis of displaced persons.

MORE GUNS ON NAJAF'S STREETS?

¶3. (C) The concept of the Public Committees as community watch organizations is still fluid but apparently involves armed individuals. "We are working," Abtan explained to REO staff, "to acquire personal weapons permits for the Public Committee members." He hastened to add that there would be coordination with local security forces to avoid any friendly fire incidents. In addition to their security function, Abtan noted, the Committees could also be used to secure distribution of fuel products.

¶4. (C) Despite initial approval from the Provincial Council, the Public Committees idea has not yet been put into action. Abtan said that the local government, the Provincial Council, security forces and district offices are holding meetings to define the shape of the Committees, and would also consult and coordinate with the person chosen to lead them in each sector of the province. In order to be appointed a leader, one must be well

known, well respected and not a Baathist, according to the Deputy Governor.

NOT EVERYONE IS ON BOARD

15. (C) The thought of having more armed men on the streets has not met with universal approval, however. The Deputy Governor pointed out that the Hawza, while supporting the idea of Public Committees, have expressed concern about arming the groups. The Ayatollahs reportedly believe that doing so may lead to increased violence in the Old City, where they reside, and throughout Najaf generally.

16. (C) The head of the Iraqi National Accord (INA, the party of former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi) in Najaf, Abdul Al Essawi, was quick to dismiss the idea of Public Committees as potentially dangerous and somewhat nefarious. In a phone conversation with REO staff on 31 August, he asserted that the Committees are simply a new brand of militia "with the ability to destroy the country." . Calling into question the loyalty of those who support the Popular Committees concept, Al Essawi pointed the finger at SCIRI and the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) as having the power to assemble the Committees because they are the most powerful political entities in Najaf. Not even the Hawza was spared criticism; Al Essawi called the clerics' decision to support the Public Committees "mysterious." They are "part of a plot to mislead the people," he mused.

17. (C) Speaking to REO staff by phone on 31 August, Sahib Al Ameri, head of "Allah's Martyrs," a Sadrist organization in Najaf, termed Public Committees "part of a national effort to protect people from attacks by Saddamists and Baathists." Ameri asserted that Sadrist areas do not need Public Committees because they have the Al Mahdi organization that provides social, educational and Public Committee-type protection for the people.

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COMMENT

18. (C) Insofar as the Public Committees represent an attempt by SCIRI in particular to maintain control of Najaf, Al Essawi's concerns are warranted. The membership of these committees will be largely assembled from the rolls of Badr Corps, the SCIRI militant wing, and the Hawza's lukewarm approval is unlikely to slow the initiative's momentum. Among provincial leaders in Najaf there is a great desire to maintain security, a desire matched by a single-minded determination to expose Baathists living in their midst. Popular Committees will almost certainly bring a greater level of "security" in Najaf, but the cost will be the acceptance of armed men roaming the streets outside of the auspices of either the Iraqi police or Army. On a number of occasions, Muqtada Al Sadr has asked the Ayatollahs if he could provide security in Old Town, Najaf. Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani has rebuffed each offer. With the advent of Public Committees Sadr is likely to use the situation to roll out a similar community watch-type organization as cover for the movements and operations of his Jaysh Al Mahdi.HUNTER